

## 3. The Subject Matter of the Logic

### The Logic is the Logic of Formations of Consciousness

Before making a start with the Logic itself we should clarify what the Logic is about, partly because Hegel is not exactly crystal clear on the matter himself, seemingly providing contradictory suggestions on the question, and secondly because without knowing what it is that Hegel is talking about, we can still read the *Logic* as a work of literature, but not as a work of science.

Look at how Hegel defines the subject matter of the Logic in the section of the *Science of Logic* entitled “With What must Science Begin?”, dealing with the beginning of the system of philosophy, following on from the Preface to the system, that is, the *Phenomenology*:

“The beginning is *logical* in that it is to be made in the element of thought that is free and for itself, in *pure knowing*. It is *mediated* because pure knowing is the ultimate, absolute truth of *consciousness*. The phenomenology of spirit is the science of consciousness, and consciousness has for result the *Notion* of science, i.e. pure knowing. Logic, then, has for its presupposition the science of manifested spirit, which contains and demonstrates the necessity, and so the truth, of the standpoint occupied by pure knowing and of its mediation. In this science of manifested spirit the beginning is made from empirical, *sensuous* consciousness and this is *immediate* knowledge in the strict sense of the word; in that work there is discussed the significance of this immediate knowledge. Other forms of consciousness such as belief in divine truths, inner experience, knowledge through inner revelation, etc., are very ill-fitted to be quoted as examples of immediate knowledge as a little reflection will show. In the work just mentioned [i.e., *The Phenomenology of Spirit*] immediate consciousness is also the first and that which is immediate in the science itself, and therefore the presupposition; but in logic, the presupposition is that which has proved itself to be the result of that phenomenological consideration – the Idea as pure knowledge.” (*Science of Logic* §93)

The first thing to note here: despite claims to the contrary from many of his interpreters, but also with support from Hegel himself at times, the Logic does *not* begin without presuppositions. The presupposition for the Logic is the development of philosophical consciousness – “the Idea as pure knowledge.” This is a really crucial point. Without people capable of philosophical thought, you can’t have a logic. See how distant this is from Kant’s reliance on the existence of a Pure Reason to which all individuals have access. See how different is Hegel’s idea from the idea of a Logic which stands outside and separate from its object, and is ‘applied’ to the object.

Secondly, and related to the point above: “the Logic is the truth of the Phenomenology.” That is, Hegel has taken us through the immanent development of consciousness, its own internal movement, and in the end consciousness negates itself, and consequently passes over into something else, which is its truth. In this case, consciousness develops up to the point of absolute knowing, where it comes to know itself as a necessary process of development, as the work of Spirit, we might say, and consequently, its truth is the pure essentialities of manifest spirit, the Logic. Putting it another way, the Logic is what turns out to be the essential phenomenology. We will come across this type of transition later, in the Logic itself.

Thirdly, what we find here is the explanation for a maxim that we will come back to again: the claim that “there is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.” (*Science of Logic* §92) The Logic, even the very first concept of the Logic, Being, the immediate, is mediated. As we have seen in the *Phenomenology*, the beginning of philosophy is mediated by the long drawn out process through which consciousness eventually arrives at philosophy, or at least at philosophy in its Hegelian form, “absolute knowledge.” But two different processes are entailed, on the one hand, the derivation or proof of the simple concept from which the Logic will begin, which lies *outside* the Logic, and on the other hand, the exposition of the internal development of that concept itself which is the *content* of the Logic.

Fourthly, we see that manifested spirit, of which the Logic is the truth, is a science which refers to an empirical content, manifested spirit, or consciousness. Like any other science, Hegel’s *Logic* must have an empirical domain in which its claims can be exhibited and tested. The *Phenomenology* presents this empirical domain. That the narrative presented in the *Phenomenology* is an idealised or notional narrative does not take away from this fact; all sciences have as their object idealised or necessary (as opposed to contingent) forms of movement. In this sense what the Logic has to deal with is not only mediated, through the development of a science, but also immediate, in that it is given in experience.

Finally, to repeat the qualification made above. The empirical domain in which the subject matter of the Logic is to be validated is consciousness, consciousness in the extended meaning which Hegel gives to it, inclusive of thinking, social practice and culture. Hegel explains the idea of a *Gestalt* by means of a grand historical narrative, but there is no reason or value in restricting the concept of *Gestalt* to entire social formations or historical epochs. In fact, such an interpretation cannot withstand criticism, because at no time in human history to date has the entire world been embraced in a single social formation. And Hegel would not say any differently. Even in his mature system with its theory of world history, he never proposed that the whole world constitutes a single configuration or shape of consciousness. The *Weltgeist*, or “World Spirit” actually moves around, and animates developments in different countries at different times. But the domain of international relations he describes as a ‘state of nature’, that is to say, a field of mutually alien subjects *not* sharing a common culture or system of social practices.

So we take the *Gestalten*, which make up the object domain over which the Logic is validated, to be the concepts or ‘projects’ or the self-conscious systems of social practice that make up a whole formation of consciousness.

### **The Logic is the foundation for a presuppositionless philosophy**

Now the opposite thesis, that the Logic is the foundation for a presuppositionless philosophy, will be defended.

Hegel expends a lot of energy emphasizing that philosophy cannot set off from arbitrary presuppositions or axioms. Any finite science is only a part of philosophy and therefore has a beginning and consequently, finds the content of its subject matter given to it from elsewhere. But philosophy cannot enjoy such a luxury; it forms a *circle*. It is self-construing, and must generate its own beginning. Let’s look at this passage:

“Philosophy, if it would be a science, cannot borrow its method from a subordinate science like mathematics, any more than it can remain satisfied with categorical assurances of inner intuition, or employ arguments based on grounds adduced by external reflection. On the contrary, it can be only the nature of the content itself which spontaneously develops itself in a scientific method of knowing, since it is at the same time the reflection of the content itself which first posits and generates its determinate character. The understanding determines, and holds the determinations fixed; reason is negative and dialectical, because it resolves the determinations of the

understanding into nothing; it is positive because it generates the universal and comprehends the particular therein.” (Science of Logic, With What Must Science Begin?, §§8-9)

“It can be only the nature of the content itself” which determines the character of the science, namely, the *Gestalten* given in the *Phenomenology*. But no science simply abstracts its principles from empirical observation. It is still necessary to posit the principles which underlie appearances, and in the case of the *Phenomenology*, we know already Hegel’s idea of the underlying dynamics at work in the *Gestalten* is internal sceptical critique of the *Gestalt*’s ultimate conception of truth.

Whether and to what extent formations of consciousness really pass away as the result of sceptical critique is something that could be called into question. But for example, when Galileo formulated the laws determining the speed at which objects rolled down an inclined plane, the laws he came up with did not correspond to the actuality in which a *multiplicity* of processes were at work which would remain unknown to physical science for some time. But Galileo got to the essence of the process and his discovery stands today as well as it did 400 years ago. The same is true of the Logic. It is not empirically abstracted from observation of *Gestalten*, but is developed according to its *own method*, which in turn rests on the idea of *immanent critique*. The usefulness or otherwise of the science which results is for us to judge.

So the Logic must be developed by beginning with an empty concept – just thought, not thought of something else already given, just thought – and then allowing the content to develop through the process of immanent critique, critique which at each step, draws only on the concepts derived previously and drawing in nothing from outside.

This method Hegel calls dialectic. Dialectic is negative because its sceptical critique undermines and destroys the given shape of consciousness, by showing it to be self-destructive. But Hegel claims that dialectic is not only negative but also positive in that it not only negates the original proposition, showing a given concept to be “untrue,” but it also brings forward a new concept which constitutes the truth of what had gone before. Thus there is a sense in which we can agree that the Logic is to be a presuppositionless science. All that is required is to determine a concept from which to begin which can be asserted, without making any presupposition and importing nothing extraneous that does not arise from the method itself.

So in a sense the claim that the Logic is an internally generated, presuppositionless science which deals only with the relations between concepts, turns out to be the

same as the claim that the Logic deals with the pure essentialities of the manifested spirit exhibited in the *Phenomenology*, because of Hegel's rather idealistic claim that it is the action of sceptical criticism of the ultimate criterion of truth which generates the destruction of one formation of consciousness and its eventual replacement by another. But when we recall what Hegel means by 'formation of consciousness', the accusation of 'idealism' is not as damning as may it may be thought to be at first.

## **The Logic studies the inner contradictions within concepts**

Now at this point it is fair to ask what it means to say that a *concept* is internally contradictory or that it can shown to be 'untrue'. Surely, in the context of logic, it is only *propositions* which can be true or untrue. Take a concept, 'prosperity' for example; how can we say that 'prosperity' is true or untrue, how can very the *concept* itself be tested against a reality?

The way Hegel deals with this depends on the following explanation that Hegel offers in connection with the concept of 'Being': "Being itself and the special sub-categories of it which follow, as well as those of logic in general, may be looked upon as definitions of the Absolute, or metaphysical definitions of God." (*Shorter Logic* §84) Think of it this way: take any concept and put it in place of x in the proposition "x is the absolute." So in the above example, we say: "Prosperity is the absolute." Now that's a proposition which can be subjected to criticism and tested against reality. This is what Hegel means by the critique of a *concept*. So to say that a concept is *untrue* simply means that it is *relative* and not absolute, it has its limits, it is true only up to a certain point, it is not 'absolute'.

Also, it is one thing to grasp what is meant by the truth of a concept, but what is meant by the truth of a *social practice* or project? Well, the object is a *Gestalt*, which is the unity of a way of thinking, a way of life and a cultural constellation, so whichever aspect of the *Gestalt* you have in mind, the question can be reframed as whether the given shape of consciousness is self-identical. It is an open question what may cause a shape of consciousness, or project, to become internally unsustainable, but it is reasonable to suggest that it means that what people are doing corresponds to what they think they are doing and how they represent what are doing. The untruth, or dissonance between a concept and the representations and social practices which correspond to it, is no more on one side than another. A social practice is untrue if the activity does not correspond to its self-consciousness and self-representation. So if we have a maxim like "Prosperity is absolute," then the truth of this shape of consciousness is tested out in the reality of a form of life organised around the God of Prosperity. Even in this example we can see that a vast

field for social critique opens up around the concept, as soon as it is treated as something *concrete* in this way.

So a first approximation to the form of movement represented in the Logic is that Hegel puts up a judgment or a maxim, such as in the form of “x is absolute,” and then understanding that the claim in question is not an abstract set of words, but corresponds to some concrete form of life, he subjects it to critique. Nevertheless, corresponding to the basic idea of the Phenomenology, which depends on the thesis that social life is intelligible, the critique of each concept is executed logically.

But first let us clear up some possible *misconceptions*. When we’re talking about critique of a concept, ‘Being’ for example, we are not talking about the ‘thought of being’, or ‘Being’ as a subjective thought form filed away in a brain cell, and what happens to you when you think of Being, or some such thing; we would be talking about ‘Being’ as the essential character of a formation of consciousness. Critique of Being then means critique of the viability and vulnerability to sceptical attack, of a certain condition of existence. The brilliance of Hegel’s discovery here is that he is indeed able to reproduce the character of formations of consciousness through an exposition which is entirely comprehensible as a logical critique of a series of claims for a concept as absolute truth. It’s a kind of two part harmony, simultaneously logical and social critique.

## Avatars

Another observation. The translation of Hegel is complicated by the fact that in German all nouns bear capital initial letters, whereas in English and other European languages, the initial capital is reserved for proper names. But when Hegel is translated into English it is common for many of the abstract nouns to retain their initial capital, having the effect of endowing the abstract entities with personality. And Hegel does treat abstractions as if they were personae. It is comparable to the use of proper nouns for political parties or social groups when discussing public opinion, social climate and so on. Given that there is nothing ungrammatical when it is written in German, there was never any need for Hegel to justify the practice. It is quite consistent with Hegel’s philosophy, although it is not possible to fully justify this until we have come to the Subjective Logic in our study of the Logic. But if we were to ask ourselves what are these entities which populate the pages of the Logic: Actuality, Notion, Necessity, Concept, etc., etc., then the answer is that they are formations of human consciousness nothing else; they are not actually personages, but the pure essentialities of personages. There is no Cartesian extensionless hyperspace in which concepts can exist; they occupy the same space in which human beings live.

The alternative ways of reading Hegel would be either to presume that Hegel was *deifying* abstractions in a quasi-religious sense (which does have a certain amount of truth in it) or that the practice of talking about abstractions as if they were human subjects was thoughtless or simply playfulness (which is not justified).

## The problem of “Moving Concepts”

Just as a great deal of misunderstanding arises from reading Hegel through the kaleidoscopic lens of a Kantian subject, so also a great deal of mischief arises from reading the *Logic* through the kaleidoscopic lens of a Cartesian thought-space. The usual “Introduction to Hegel” includes an exposition of Hegel’s *Logic* as a presuppositionless philosophy; often presuppositionless to the extent that not even spirit or consciousness is presupposed. This is, as we have seen, in direct contradiction to what Hegel says in a number of key texts, about the connection between *Phenomenology* and *Logic*. Writers can believe that this claim is defensible because they do not see that anything need be presupposed in the existence of concepts, and believe that a concept can exist independently of being thought of by someone. But *where* do concepts exist? For that we can only fall back on Descartes, to some extensionless thought-space inhabited by thought forms.

Typically the first 3 or 4 categories of the *Logic* are elaborated (few writers ever go further than the first 3 or 4 categories, other than by just listing them) by claiming that if the reader thinks of a certain concept – so here we are talking about a subjective act of summoning up these thought forms out of their extensionless hyperspace into the awareness of a living human being – and then contemplates them, then the concept “slides into,” or “disappears into” or thought (of an individual thinker presumably) “leads itself to” or “becomes” or is “led by its own intrinsic necessity” to contemplate another concept. So we get a mixture of concepts which move and, without any distinction, the subjective attention of a thinking person moving from one concept to another.

And all this without any consideration as to what language the thinker knows and whether in thinking of ‘Being’ they are an English speaker, or whether the thinker in question has ever studied philosophy, or whether they may have been a student of Husserl or Heidegger or Sartre and be familiar with a concept of ‘Being’ quite different from what a student of Hegel might be prompted to think. And then we are asked to believe that the thinker in beginning to contemplate the word “Being,” B-E-I-N-G, will be led, by necessity through the 204 concepts which constitute the *Science of Logic*, of necessity. If Kant is accused of putting too much store in the reliability of Pure Reason, he had nothing on this. It is unlikely that anyone who has

had the first two transitions in Hegel's Logic demonstrated to them for the first time, could get further than the third on their own, simply reliant on "pure reason."

And in what space do these moving concepts move? A puzzling question for even a philosophically trained person, but to talk about how a concept *moves* without settling how it can have a location in the first place is nonsensical. Maybe what is meant by concepts moving is that they change 'shape', but it still remains to explain what would be meant by the 'shape' of a concept. And yet almost every book on the Logic will tell you that concepts move, with generally very little explanation as to what is to be understood by a concept and the space in which it exists, to be able to justify such a claim.

Now it is more plausible to say that the attention of a thinker will move from one concept to another. That is at least a plausible claim and certainly, if we think of something long enough and critically enough, we will tend to be led to think of something else, and this kind of movement at least comes close to the kind of movement Hegel is talking about. But this is not acceptable for science, and certainly not for philosophy. We are talking about a philosophical system worked out in the wake of criticism of Descartes and Hume and Kant and Fichte. If we are going to take the self-reported stream of consciousness of individuals as the object for science, then we can't call it Logic and it will probably have a great deal of trouble standing up to scrutiny as a branch of psychology too. Stream of consciousness is not the object of Hegel's Logic.

So to reiterate, Logic is the study of the pure essentialities of shapes of consciousness, or *Gestalten*, the objects which were in turn the subject matter of the *Phenomenology*. These *Gestalten* are the unity of a way of thinking (or ideology), a way of life (or project or social practice) and a constellation of culture (i.e., language, means of production, etc.). Hegel's Logic stands in the same relation to the social practices or projects of a formation of consciousness as formal logic stands to the propositions of a formal theory.

The presuppositions of the Logic are human beings who have come to absolute knowing, that is to say, to Hegelian philosophy, understanding that they are products of and participants in the whole spiritual journey of human kind to self-knowledge, and that the truth of that journey lies in the pure essentialities of manifest spirit. The Logic is able to present itself in the form of a self-construing method of logical critique, because this historical development of shapes of consciousness is intelligible and can be explicated in its essentialities, by means of what would be in the context, reasonable arguments.



On this basis it is now possible to see why the Logic has an important place in the development of Hegel's philosophical system as a whole, and equally a place in the development of *each* of the sciences. For each science, together with its object, has developed as a part of the unfolding of those same formations of consciousness. The sciences are *themselves* projects, or *formations of consciousness* and if it is valid, the Logic ought to give us guidance on the trajectory of each of the sciences under the impact of scientific skepticism.

This brings us to a few remarks on the scope and usefulness of the Logic.

### **The Logic concerns *real* situations, not mathematical abstractions**

What is the difference between Hegel's Logic and the kind of logic which figures in mathematics or to take a less cut-and-dry contrast, the kind of logic implicit in the rules of evidence used in court proceedings?

Hegel's Logic differs from the kind of logic known to positivism and most other forms of philosophical discourse in exactly the way Hegel's understanding of concepts differs from the narrow, formal logical, mathematical conception of concept, which is closely tied to set theory and depends on the *attributes of a thing* rather than the thing itself.

In a court of law, the point is to first discover whether a particular *factual* claim is true, and in very general terms, participants will endeavor to establish an agreed or compelling basis in fact, and call upon logic to be able to determine whether a given conclusion can be drawn from those facts. Mathematics is similar, but is not troubled by the need for agreed facts, which is the job of particular sciences, being concerned only with the rules governing consistent sequences of symbolic propositions within a theory beginning from an arbitrary collection of axioms.

The point is that each of these sciences (jurisprudence and mathematics) constitute a Gestalt. They are methods of arriving at truth which recognise certain criteria for reasonable belief, and the scope of questions which may be asked and answers given. As a result of historical and cultural change, and changes in the ethos of the societies of which they are a part, as well as the special, historically articulated institutions of which they are a part (legal practice, universities, and so on), these criteria will change and be subject to revision and concretization. It is this process of change which is the subject of Hegel's Logic. So there is a strong sense in which Hegel's logic is a meta-theory in relation to jurisprudence, mathematics, formal logic, natural science, or any other formalized procedure for determining the truth.

Secondly, formal or mathematical logic takes for granted the validity of putting outside of itself the facts and axioms which it uses. Formal thinking, that is to say, thinking with *forms* abstracted from their *content*, is able to do this, because like Kant, it operates with a transcendental subject in this sense. For formal thought, an entity is an *x* with *attributes*; in Aristotelian terms this *x* is called the 'subject', to which various predicates can be attributed. For modern formal thought, there is nothing left when attributes have been stripped away and logic operates simply with the dichotomous, Boolean logic of 'has/has not' any given attribute. But on the contrary Hegel's logic is concerned with the *concept itself*, what it essentially *is*, and the method of considering an object from the point of view of its contingent attributes is just one, limited *Gestalt*, which is valid up to a certain point, but beyond that point it is untrue and bankrupt.

So finally, it can be seen from the above that the Logic is a meta-theory of science in the sense that it is concerned with the logic entailed in how sciences change what they take to be given without presupposition and what kind of questions and answers they admit.

This passage from the *Science of Logic* expresses something of this kind which is important about the Logic:

"It is only after profounder acquaintance with the other sciences that logic ceases to be for subjective spirit a merely abstract universal and reveals itself as the universal which embraces within itself the wealth of the particular – just as the same proverb, in the mouth of a youth who understands it quite well, does not possess the wide range of meaning which it has in the mind of a man with the experience of a lifetime behind him, for who, the meaning is expressed in all its power. Thus the value of logic is only apprehended when it is preceded by experience of the sciences; it then displays itself to mind as the universal truth, not as a particular knowledge alongside other matters and realities, but as the essential being of all these latter." (Science of Logic §71)

Or, as he put in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*: "In this treatise we take for granted the scientific procedure of philosophy, which has been set forth in the philosophic logic." (§2ad.)

Also, it is not just science. The Logic deals with the Logic underlying the trajectory of any project or social practice that is in some way organised around a shared conception of truth and shared aims, and that's a very wide domain.

Very broadly speaking, Hegel's logic differs from formal logic in that it deals with genuinely complex situations, situations which cannot be circumscribed, situations where the constitution of the situation itself is part of the problem, where it is impossible to draw a line between problem and solution, between the object of study and the subject of study, in other words, all genuinely human problems, as opposed to abstract, analytically impoverished, formal, in-group problems.

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